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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS IMPRISONED DISSIDENTS NGUYEN VAN DAI AND
LE THI CONG NHAN

Reftel: Hanoi 286

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Ambassador met with two of Vietnam's most prominent political prisoners, dissident attorneys Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan, on October 2 and 3 respectively. Both appeared healthy and described prison conditions not out of keeping with the norm in Vietnam. Dai was in reasonably good spirits and said that he occupies his days with Bible study and English classes. Nhan, by contrast, voiced dissatisfaction with her living quarters, food, and housekeeping responsibilities; however, she acknowledged that she was treated the same as other prisoners. She has a Bible and is able to pray freely. Characteristically defiant, Nhan refuses to acknowledge guilt or to profess love of the Communist Party. Speaking with prison officials before meeting Dai, the Ambassador reiterated U.S. interest in the well-being of Dai's fellow prisoner Father Nguyen Van Ly. END SUMMARY.

Nguyen Van Dai

¶2. (SBU) On October 2, the Ambassador visited Ba Sao Prison, a 3,000-inmate minimum security facility nestled in the karst hills of Ha Nam province, to meet human rights attorney and Bloc 8406 activist Nguyen Van Dai. Dai appeared fit and responded to questions clearly and articulately. Although conducted in the presence of Prison Commander Duong Duc Thang and his deputies, the 45-minute meeting was relatively informal. Thang insisted that Dai communicate in Vietnamese, but otherwise did not interject.

¶3. (SBU) Dai reported that he lives with 57 other prisoners in a two-level dormitory-style ward and is treated no differently than other prisoners. He said that he rises at 5:30 am and occupies his free time with Bible study -- using the Bible that was given to him by the visiting USCIRF delegation in October 2007 -- and English-language classes. Dai said that he initially took part in the camp's "production activities," but was given permission to stop after his allergies flared up. He said that, as with other prisoners, he is allowed monthly visits by family, who provide him with imported medication to treat his allergies and health complications connected with an earlier bout of Hepatitis B. Dai affirmed that otherwise he is in good health and exercises regularly.

¶4. (SBU) Following the meeting, the Ambassador inquired about Father Nguyen Van Ly, another prominent member of Bloc 8406, whom the Ambassador met at Ba Sao prison in March (reftel). Smiling, Thang responded that while Father Ly is "not an ideal prisoner," he remains in good health and continues to voice his opinions strenuously.

Le Thi Cong Nhan

¶5. (SBU) The following day, October 3, the Ambassador visited Thanh Hoa Province's Prison 5, a larger minimum security prison located two hours south of Bao Son, to meet with Dai's close associate,

dissident attorney and Bloc 8406 member Le Thi Cong Nhan. Nhan appeared healthy, but subdued and defiant. She chose her words carefully, noting that she had only been informed of the meeting ten minutes previously. Prison Commander Thai Trinh Tuong and his staff were considerably less at ease than their counterparts at Ba Sao and kept the conversation strictly to the allotted thirty minutes. Before the meeting, Tuong complained that Nhan was not serving her sentence "properly," often breaking prison rules and refusing to work. Worse, in Tuong's estimation, Nhan would not acknowledge her offense, a primary requirement for amnesty.

¶6. (SBU) At the beginning of the meeting, Nhan said that she had been admonished by prison officials to "speak honestly," but felt intimidated since that was precisely what had gotten her in trouble with the law to begin with. Nevertheless, she would try to tell the truth, she said. Commenting on prison conditions, Nhan said that she was housed with 53 other inmates in a dormitory-style ward in a separate all-female section of the prison. (Note: According to Tuong, approximately one quarter of the prison's 4,000 inmates are female. End note.) She said that her living arrangements were the same as those of her fellow prisoners, but complained that the ward was too crowded, with inmates sleeping "shoulder to shoulder." She also criticized the food, describing the weekly servings of fish and pork as miniscule.

¶7. (SBU) An observant Protestant, Nhan said that she has a Bible and is able to pray freely; however, the approximately 50 Catholics that she knew in prison were afraid to request a Bible. Asked about her daily routine, Nhan said that she was not required to work as hard as the others, and that her primary responsibility was to assist in sweeping the floor and cutting the grass. She protested, however, that prison officials did not supply her with adequate

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tools. She attempted to organize a petition, but none of the other women would sign. (Note: After the meeting, Tuong noted that other women assigned to sweep the floor typically make their own brooms from banana leaves. End note.) Nhan complained of frequent sinus headaches and stomach pain, but said that after a cursory exam, the prison doctor had dismissed her ailments as minor. She said that, per prison regulations, she is visited once a month by relatives. They provide her with over-the-counter medicine for her symptoms, but she is reluctant to take them without clear instructions from a doctor.

¶8. (SBU) Turning to politics, Nhan insisted that despite pressure, she refuses to proclaim her love for the Communist Party of Vietnam or to acknowledge that stating her political opinions constitutes a crime. Even if she were a model prisoner in all other respects, this fact alone would preclude amnesty, she said.

Background Information

¶9. (SBU) Prominent members of the Bloc 8406 political movement, attorneys Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan were convicted in May 2007 under Article 88 of the criminal code, which bans "conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam." Dai was sentenced to five years in prison, Nhan to four; their sentences were later reduced by one year. Founder of the Vietnam Committee for Human Rights, Dai is a recipient of Human Rights Watch's Hellman and Hammett award for writers under persecution. Prior to her arrest Nhan was the spokesman for the Vietnam Progression Party. The United States has raised both individuals' cases repeatedly and at senior levels, including by Secretary Rice to FM Khiem during President Triet's July 2007 visit to Washington.

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